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## The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 09

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Playwright's Lab  
at Hollins University

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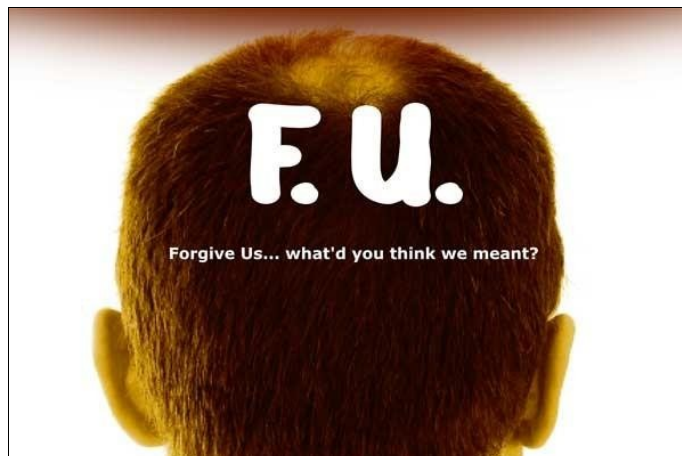


# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 01, Issue 09 (February, 2008)

## ***F.U. (Forgive us, what did you think we meant?)***



Charter Theatre, Washington's only theater devoted solely to the new play development and production, premiered *F. U.*, a dark new comedy by Charter Artistic Director and MFA playwright Keith Bridges. The production ran from January 11th through February 2nd to near capacity crowds.

"Smart and funny is always a good one-two punch, and playwright Keith Bridges lands that combination repeatedly." is how Nelson Pressley of the Washington Post led off his

review of the show.

*F. U. – or, Forgive Us, What Did You Think We Meant?* is the story of Karl, a middle-aged man who is about to emotionally implode from the pressures of his rotten job, the day-to-day turmoil of his crappy marriage and the sheer weight of his weasely personality. He'll either be able to turn his life around by facing up to his fears or he won't—and the Fates are betting that he won't.

The play is directed by Joe

Banno and stars Allyson Currin, Ray Ficca, Sarah Melinda and Michael Skinner.

This production was also part of the Creative Inquiry Project in conjunction with Clemson University. In this collaboration, dramaturgy students from Clemson (under the guidance of Dr. Mark Charney and Carrie Ann Collins) followed the evolution of the play from print on a page to words in an actor's mouth.

Since its inception in 1998, Charter Theatre has produced 23 new plays. Charter Theatre is currently producing incoming student Clinton Johnston's play, *Am I Black Enough Yet?*



Production photo by Ray Gniewek.

[www.chartertheatre.org](http://www.chartertheatre.org)

## **Student Spotlight: Erin Allen**



**Erin Allen** received her Art Education BS from James Madison University in 1998. She has taught in Roanoke City

Schools and in Loudoun County, VA for two years before taking a position in Lexington, where she has taught since 2003.

Erin told us, "I had one high school class in drama, I have largely educated myself on the subject. Through the program at Hollins I hope to improve my knowledge of how a play is written and better understand how to teach young actors to perform written words. I also hope to satisfy my own curiosities about theatre, plays, and acting. I am drawn to

wonderfully written words and to the actions born from them."

Erin is herself a very skilled creative writer, even if that writing hasn't been predominantly for the stage.

She is passionate about her work, generous with her talents, and directed many student plays for the Lexington City Schools.

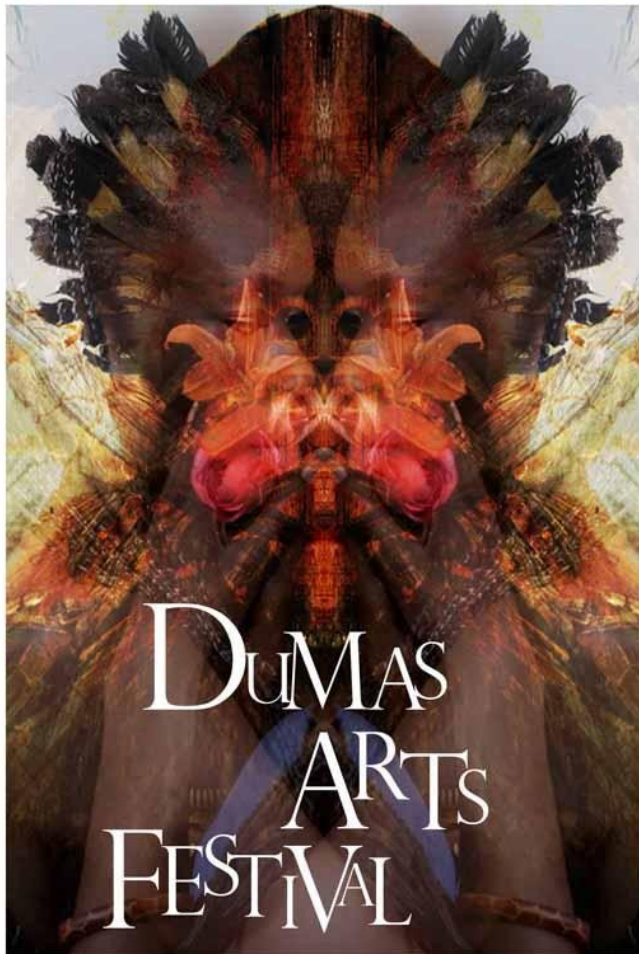
She is also a very talented visual artist and we're certain that her knack for tapping into student's artistic abilities will serve her well as she finds a wider audience for her work in the theatre.

# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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## Dumas Arts Festival



22-24 FEBRUARY 2008

DUMAS DRAMA GUILD

ART THAT EMPOWERS

The first Dumas Arts Festival is a cooperative effort between the Dumas Drama Guild, the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University, Charter Theatre, Mill Mountain Theatre and the Earl Hamner Theatre to celebrate African American theatre, film and poetry. It was made possible by a donation from MFA playwright Kenley Smith.



**Amy Gerber-Stroh recently joined the Hollins film faculty**

The Friday schedule included a talk on African-American cinema by Amy Gerber-Stroh.

Amy has produced and directed more than 30 documentaries and art films. She has had significant professional film experience in Hollywood and New York, working on several 'B-movie' features by Roger Corman and was casting associate on twelve major motion pictures, including *Goldeneye* and *The Mask of Zorro*. Her documentary feature, *Public Memory*, was completed in 2004. Amy earned her MFA from California

Institute of the Arts, School of Film/Video. She is a member of the film faculty at Hollins.



**Hollins undergraduate film student Kalimah Abioto**

Amy's talk was followed by a screening of *If the People Could Fly*, an original film by Hollins undergraduate film student Kalimah Abioto. The evening also included two short pieces by local playwright Dwayne Yancey, a Roanoke Valley journalist, playwright and author. By day, he is a senior editor at The Roanoke Times. In what's left of his spare time, he writes plays. He's had scripts produced in 38 states and 6 foreign countries.



**White Goes First by Dwayne Yancey**

Friday's program ended with musical excerpts from the upcoming Hollins University production of Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*, directed by Ernie Zulia.

Saturday's schedule included free workshops in acting and poetry, as well as an exhibition poetry slam in the afternoon.

The centerpiece of the weekend came Saturday evening with Lenora Inez Brown's discussion of African American theatre prior to Charter Theatre Company's staged reading of Clinton

Johnston's new play, *Am I Black Enough Yet?*

Lenora teaches at The Theatre School at DePaul University and served as literary manager and dramaturg for the Crossroads Theatre Company, the nation's leading African-American theater. Lenora will be returning to Roanoke this summer as visiting faculty in the Playwright's Lab.

**The Festival Centerpiece was Clinton Johnston's innovative play on race, *Am I Black Enough, Yet?***



Clinton is a member of the theatre faculty at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, VA. He received his MFA in directing from the University of Virginia. Clinton will be entering the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University in the coming summer to pursue his MFA in dramatic writing.

The festival concluded with a jazz concert with the William Penn Trio on Sunday afternoon, during which poetry readings were interspersed between numbers, featuring work by T. J. Anderson III. T. J.'s creative and critical work appear in *Black Renaissance Noire*, *Sulfur*, *African American Literature Review*, and *Callaloo*. He is the author of *At Last Round Up*, a chapbook of poetry, a critical book on jazz poetry, and the Spoken Word CD *Blood Octave*. A former Senior Fulbright Scholar in Egypt, Anderson currently teaches at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA.



**DUMAS DRAMA GUILD**  
ART THAT EMPOWERS

[www.myspace.com/dumas\\_arts\\_festival](http://www.myspace.com/dumas_arts_festival)



## What Do I Know About War? One-Woman Show comes to Hollins Studio Theatre



**Margo Lee Sherman**, internationally acclaimed playwright and New York performance artist, brought her one-woman show to Hollins University Theatre this month as a guest of both the undergraduate Theatre Department and the graduate Playwright's Lab.

As part of this semester's playwriting course for undergraduate students,

Margo will be presenting her newly revised one-woman show, *WHAT DO I KNOW ABOUT WAR?*

Sherman's play is based on research and interviews she conducted with veterans of the Iraq War and their families. The resulting text incorporates the actual words of American soldiers who have served in Iraq, and takes an unflinching look at the human cost of war and its tragic dehumanization.

From two innocent 19-year-old girls who leave home for the first time to serve in Iraq and are killed in combat to a professional soldier who re-examines his beliefs in the wake of Abu Ghraib to become a conscientious objector, Sherman's portrayal of fifteen

real-life characters conveys the many dimensions of the complex tragedy of this war.

The first version of this play was presented at Theatre for the New City in New York in March of 2006 where it was hailed by the New York Times as "...brilliant, surreal, like eavesdropping on a small, sorrowful town...a one-woman show that puts a face to the words of soldiers in the Iraq War."

Sherman's performance in our newly renovated Studio Theatre Space delivered the same experience. After the show the guest artist held a talk back with the audience.

One of our more conservative faculty members commented

after the show that he had come expecting a liberal barrage, but had been really pleased to discover that it was a thoughtful, non-partisan effort to change the dialogue about the war from politics to something more human. He'd come ready to argue and instead had nothing but gratitude for the experience.

It was also a great opportunity for young theatre students with no connection to the explosive and socially relevant theatre of the '60s to be exposed to the simplicity and passion of the theatre that drove Bread and Puppet, Theatre for the New City, The Living Theatre, and other groups that came out of that era.

[myspace.com/theaterforthenewcity](http://myspace.com/theaterforthenewcity)



## Guest Profile: Margo Lee Sherman



**Margo Lee Sherman** is one of the formative members of the legendary Bread and Puppet Theatre. She has created over 30 one-woman shows and has

performed in 20 countries—including performances of Samuel Beckett's *NOT I* and *FOOTFALLS* in Czechoslovakia in 1989, the first artist permitted to present Beckett there in two decades. The production was featured in a documentary on Beckett, televised nationally on PBS.

Sherman is known for a striking inward intensity and concentration that can stimulate a powerful response from the audience. She has often been chosen to represent the United States at theatre festivals abroad.

Margo Sherman is a three-time

recipient of grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and Arts International.

"Margo is one of the most intense and highly focused actors I've ever worked with," said Todd Ristau, after spending the afternoon helping Margo recreate the blocking of her stage show in an unfamiliar theatre. "She ritualistically doesn't eat for five hours before the performance, Margo has none of that kind of acting like it's just a job where you to step outside for a cigarette right before you go on, do your dance under the lights, and then hit the

loading dock for another smoke. This kind of performing is a tremendously dedicated process. I'm so glad she could expose our students to theatre as an art form rather than as an avocation. Too often we get caught up in training students for a job in the theatre, but it is just as important to develop your craft within an art form. As important as the content of her work is, this demonstration of herself as an artist was well worth bringing to Hollins."

After the show, an audience member said, "I don't know if it was two minutes or two hours. She is that good."

## Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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Check out our MySpace page!  
<http://www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab>

### From the Director: Submission Tip #7

In addition to my role as Program Director, I'm also the Literary Associate at a professional theatre. This means I read (and reject) a lot of plays. For the next few issues, I'll be presenting tips to take some mystery and agony out of the submission process.

**Never submit electronically unless the submission guidelines specifically request that you do.**

Now, having said this, I have to admit that a lot of theatres have moved to using paperless submissions, and that's very commendable. But, if you think it is easy for your paper script to get lost on someone's desk, imagine how easy it is to lose an email. How many have you lost?

The literary office I work in doesn't accept e-submissions. There are several reasons for this, and some people have told me that those reasons are silly and old fashioned. Well, some people say that about theatre, too.

Accepting email submissions makes it easier to get a virus, because you're opening a flood of attachments from people you don't know.

We already have more email than we can answer in a timely fashion, and this only adds to the backlog, especially if the writer emails back to check on the progress of his or her script.

They call it snail mail for a reason. You expect to wait when you send an envelope. Email

creates a sense of urgency. It isn't fair to try to jump to the head of the line with an emailed script, or to think an email means I should respond instantly.

One of the real joys of working in a literary office is to take a pile of scripts to the coffee shop and sit in the middle of the very people that make up the audience of my theatre while I read the plays, occasionally looking up to ask myself if those people, those real people, would come see this play. It just isn't the same experience with a laptop.

If you send me an electronic submission, to do the thing I just said I love to do I need to print it myself. We can't

afford to absorb the printing costs.

Lastly, I have a system. I stack the envelopes on a shelf so that they can be read in the order in which they are received. Don't mess with my system.



**Todd Ristau, Director  
Playwright's Lab at Hollins  
University**